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# How to make an Orchestra alone: A critical, experiential performance of Ben's year in the mountains

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## *How to make an Orchestra alone: A critical, experiential performance of Ben's year in the mountains*

*Ben Kusserow, Western Washington University*

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### **Abstract**

*This paper shares the hour-performance traveled from the boat house to the middle of the dam on Diablo Lake, WA. There were two distinct activities in each of the four sections. In each section, Ben shared a story from his year in the NCI Graduate Residency program. He then engaged the audience in some critical thought leading into an activity.*

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### **Keywords: music, environmental education, transformation**

#### *Materials needed:*

- ❖ *Playlist of three songs (second and fourth will be performed only)*
- ❖ *Outfits for all stations*
- ❖ *Sheet music for fourth and fifth section*
- ❖ *Nature's Calling Kit*
- ❖ *First Aid Kit*
- ❖ *Headlamps and Flashlights*

#### *Legend*

- ❖ *[Action]*
- ❖ *🎵 Sing*

Watch this entire performance here: [https://youtu.be/yqUzaTDbe\\_g](https://youtu.be/yqUzaTDbe_g)

Watch the original composition on Diablo Dam here: <https://youtu.be/pZtFGrTsFhk>

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### **Introduction**

Welcome! Thank you for joining me here on the traditional lands of the people of the Upper Skagit, Nooksack, Sauk-Suiattle, Thompson. There have been countless stories in this particular spot, with millions of people since time immemorial being here. Tonight, we will add one more small story to the countless already present.

Thank you to the NCI staff for supporting this week of learning. Thank you families, friends, and supporters who have listened to the



other Capstone Presentations. Thank you to Joshua, Lindsey, and Nick for guiding us through this year and half. And thank you C15, for not only presenting your hard work but also the countless experiences over these 18th months that have led us to this moment.

I understand that people have their own personal needs and I would not want to hinder that in anyway. During this performance we will have a Nature's calling kit which has hand sanitizer if you need to 'use the restroom.' We will also have a First Aid kit, incase anything happens. Please see Jihan if you need any of those.

This capstone will be a bit different than the ones you have seen before. I am a performer at heart: I love being in front of a crowd acting, singing, and generally being silly. This performance will be looking through my experience with this entire graduate program, and how music helped define each stage. This performance is divided into four distinct sections each taking part at a specific moment in the residency. After each section I will play the song that helped define that period from this speaker.

I challenge you to also look critically at each of the sections. Where was I coming from during each experience? What did I take away from it? Do any of my experiences echo something you have done?

During the performance please be where best suits you. If you need to stand up at any time please don't hesitate to. All I ask is for you to stand in the back so you will not be blocking the view for those sitting.

To set the stage my childhood is best described in JRR Tolkien's famous work, *The Lord of the Rings*. The Shire is the land of the hobbits. In it there are rolling hills, plenty of good food, and no dangerous adventures to hear of thank you very much. Even though I claimed to be 'an environmentalist' and loved to be outside, the Shire did not prepare me fully for the year I was about to experience.

My name is Ben Kusserow, and thank you again for experiencing this with me.

[Play "Concerning Hobbits." Change into PFD, swim trunks, paddle]

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[Roll the Old Dancer Along \(click for link\)](#)

It was a beautiful sunny day in mid-July here on Diablo Lake. All of C15 have shown up to the dock to explore the lake in the big canoe. While I acted just as excited as the rest of my cohort, internally I am terrified for the following reasons.

1. I had no idea what I signed myself up to. After spending all of the past year in the big city of Manchester, NH the idea of not being able to walk to the grocery store is fearful. The idea of no cell-phone coverage even worse. The possibility of no internet for extended periods of time is unthinkable horrible. Yes, I like nature but this 'adventure' style is too much for me to handle.

2. I do not remember anyone's name. Even though we had gone through introductions at least five times, none of them have stuck. At all. And Bob, or Ryan..? has just asked me to be his partner on the canoe.

After an hour or so on the water, Joshua could tell our collective energy was dwindling, so he started to tell the tale of the Dancer. It was this large ship crossing from Europe to America. On their voyage they would sing songs to keep their spirit up like

♪ We'll roll the old, Dancer along. [3x], and we'll all fall in behind.

One day, old Billy died. Now some reason or another he could not be buried at sea and they needed to keep his body till they landed. To preserve it, they put it in the alcohol. This normally wouldn't be a problem, but the barrel that Billy was in was THE LAST BARREL OF ALCOHOL! So, they started to say to one another with glasses in hand

♪ Well a little drop of blood wouldn't do us any harm [3x] and we'll all fall in behind

Joshua then continued, 'To keep our spirits up, let's sing their song as a group!' We will for sure sing this as a group later but for now I want to share what went through my head. Music was part of my daily life growing up, from church every week to camp every summer, and especially opera in college. But when I graduated college and worked for Americorps, I didn't realize that I never sang *with people*. Practicing songs alone pales in comparison to living with others through song. Having one of our first bonding experiences be through song was as dramatic for me as breathing your first breath of good, mountain air.

So all of the tension and doubt I felt melted away while we sang together. We as a community of strangers quickly became the foundation of my west coast family. This song not only connected me to people, but also made me immediately closer to this place. Now, every time I hear or sing this song, I am transported back to canoeing with C15 on that bright, summer day.

Let's recreate that moment through all of us singing! This is a challenge my choice, so if you are truly uncomfortable with singing please don't feel like you must. But I would invite you to think that making a joyful noise is better than not making one at all.

Usually this song has each person improvises a verse, but for this presentation I have asked two people to lead the verses. We will go chorus, verse 1, chorus, verse 2, and end with a last chorus. For those of you who know this already, please feel free to sing confidently and those just learning, you will be experts in it soon.

Also, if you like to harmonize, please do! I'll be practicing some fun stuff myself so get creative if you want to.

[Perform song, 2 verses with everyone, then change into suit]

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[David Bowie - Changes: \(Click for link\)](#)

When I said earlier I was a performer, I wasn't telling the whole truth. I spent my entire college experience playing in orchestras, choirs, and most notably operas. Much more a suit and bowtie affair than jeans and a punk shirt. While this was a fantastic opportunity, I did not have a lot of experience with popular music. As my opera teacher said "There is good music, then there is music of the common folk."

So when I woke up on January 10th, 2016 and found out David Bowie had died, my first response was "Who?" Now my cohort was well aware of my lack of knowledge of "common folk music" and always grilled me whenever I didn't know Cher or whoever. I spent breakfast researching a little on who he was and his accomplishments to have polite conversations with my class that day.

Arriving at class, I sat down next to Sasha and said "Did you hear David Bowie died?" To which she replies "I bet you didn't even know who he was yesterday?!" The class fell silent, and before I could think of something to say Christian Martin, my boss who was also teaching us that day, said "That's like not knowing the Rolling Stones or the Beatles!?"

I proudly replied "I know the Beatles!" but they were not buying it. My boss continued to say "I cannot have someone working for me that doesn't know who David Bowie is. I'll send you a mixtape that you are REQUIRED to listen to."

While I thought I had an extensive musical knowledge my cohort helped me see further than I could ever imagine. Imagine living your whole life looking up at the stars, but never having a telescope. One day, someone offers you theirs so you can see planets and stars with such detail that it changes your entire view of the universe. My cohort did that to me with that song.

But something unintended happened. Whenever I hear any song by David Bowie, I am transplanted back to that classroom with my cohort. They helped connect me to music, and I in turn connected that to place (however disconnected it might appear). This began a change in me to see the connections between place, people, and music.

[Play Changes, dress into Russian outfit]

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***Razboynika blagorazumnago***

Last summer I was located in Stehekin, the most remote town in the lower 49. Yes, they claim to be more remote than all of Hawaii. That remoteness, along with the rest of my mountain experience, made me long for some good, classical music again. When we moved to Bellingham for our study at Western my first priority was to find, and join, a community choir.

Last fall I joined the Bellingham Community Chorale where I could perform good, classical, non-common folk music to my heart's content. This spring we performed a 150 page Russian Score called Passion Week.

It is exactly what it sounds like. Powerful, slow, and entirely in Russian. The piece is actually an adaptation of a church service that happens in Lent.

I often felt like the weakest performer in the entire choir, so I tried to find creative ways to practice. One of the best that I did was walk to class while singing. Imagine seeing a bearded man with a backpack and headphones belting Russian on Holly Street. I loved it, but I'm not sure everyone else did.

On one of those walks I realized that that is one of the most pathetic ways that song has been performed. There are AT MINIMUM sixteen parts being sung at a time. While solos can be great, the soul of this score is to be with others. Without them, one voice alone sounds lost...disjointed...without place? Even though I was practicing, I was trying to make an orchestra alone.

[Perform song while walking to edge of dam]

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***Looking down at the sky, and up at the earth***

Music teleports me to different places. The Dancer will always take me back to that July day. Any mention of David Bowie will take me to Sundew classroom and any Russian to the streets of Bellingham. But those songs were not created for those places. We create buildings with the perfect acoustics to enjoy every drop of a song. As a place based educator, can I flip that?

My year in the mountains had me connect with songs through people. And I connected with my west coast family through place! But in all of the tools of Environmental Education I found a distinct lack of place based generated music. Where is the music that connects people to place?

If any spot deserves a song, it is right here. This is my favorite spot earth. Some say this is combining the best in nature and the best in technology. Some say tear down the dam. But whatever you think, you have to be amazed by a place where you can look down at the sky, and up at the earth. At this spot, the mountains shout back.

[Yell into valley]

Hours. I could do that for hours. It brings up so many great points of environmental education. Exploration at its primal level. The feebleness of humanity for as loud as I want to be, my echo will always fade. At the same time to hear the echo I need to give space for the mountains to talk. If humans talk the entire time, like in 99% of western music, we never hear the music in nature.

So how can I get others to connect with this place as much as me? Can I get others as excited as me about this spot through song? It is a little more challenging than you would think.

Since I'm classically trained, I'm used to having buildings built for my voice. The western melodic theory is not designed to let echoes happen for this long. [Demonstrate].

Many of the ideas discussed this week are reflected in this capstone. I started this song by incorporating the words of Mike Levad, who wrote the poem *The Wish* which is read at the end of every mountain school program and Gary Snyder's *Mid-August on Sourdough Mountain Lookout* which reflects his time on that mountain right there.

*The Wish* brings a sense of joy and wonder to our ecosystem. Gary Snyder's work showcases forest fires, not a happy topic at all especially since we had to evacuate our first summer here due to a fire. As magical as this place is, we have to acknowledge the hardships that can also happen here. It is not truly a fairy tale, but it can be more magical.

Then the words of my professors come in. "Let us listen." We need to take the time to slow down. My response to that is in fear and anger because I can't handle that silence. Silence is the absence of noise...as if I'm alone...

But after I go through that the mountains sing back. They sing "you are not alone, but you are also not the loudest, strongest, or grandest thing here. Breathe, and be humbled." After that we as a group will sing in a call and response by whatever means you have.

[Perform [Down to the Sky, Up to the Earth](#)]

*A place based song to be performed on Diablo Dam. The text incorporates Gary Snyder's Mid-August on Sourdough Mountain Lookout and Mike Levad's The Wish, along with the author's own voice.*

Let us give to our children  
Majestic mountains, laughing rivers, and healthy forests

Let us give to our children  
Pure air, crystal water, and a healthy earth

Let us give to our children  
Giant trees, lacy ferns, and delicate mushrooms

Let us give to our children  
Howling wolves, raucous ravens, and spawning salmon

Let us show to our children  
Down valley a smoke-haze, three days heat, and five days rain

Let us show  
How the pitch glows on fir cones, Across rock and meadows

Let us show  
How the cold, cold-snow water in my tin cup trapped us for days on end just months  
before

Let us show  
Endless cascades of rain, and streams, and rain, and rivers, and rain and waterfalls  
and rain.

Let us listen (3x)

I am loud! I am strong! I am grand!

I am loud, but the Skagit is louder

I am strong, but Boston Glacier is stronger

I am grand, but Pyramid is grander

Breathe, and be humbled. (3x)

What is my role in this place? The cedars stand, the cascades run, and the eagles soar.

What is our role in this place? [Audience participation]

Who should we listen for? [Audience participation]

What should we do for the next seven generations? [Audience participation]

Where we can look down at the sky, and up at the earth,

Breathe, and be humbled [3x]



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